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ABSTRACT

A study analyzed and described the writing development of 24 children in a multiethnic inner city classroom in Canada to learn whether there were measurable differences among native speakers, bilinguals, and English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) beginners. Writing samples were analyzed for describing, interpreting, generalizing, and speculating language. Results indicated that: (1) the preferred form of language was descriptive, although bilinguals used less descriptive language than the other two groups; (2) the highest incidence (although the incidence was very low) of speculating language and of generalizing language was found in the writing of the bilingual subjects; (3) the most fluent as a group were the native speakers (i.e., speakers of English); and (4) the highest global marks were assigned on average to the native speakers. (One table of data is included.) (SR)

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Written Language Growth in a Multiethnic Classroom

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Abstract

Two realities motivate this paper. One is that in Canada, training programs for ESL teachers have a way of evolving course by course out of the needs of a particular population in a particular place at a particular time. The resulting programme may be lacking a coherent rationale and be undesirably parochial in scope.

The second reality is the diversity of the ESL population and of the larger society in which it is embedded.

Written Language Growth in a Multiethnic Classroom:

A Preliminary Report

I. Overview of the Study

A. Background

When I talk to my graduate students about research, one of the sterner lectures I give has to do with the motivation for doing a particular study. NEVER, I say, use as the basis for your research the availability of subjects. Research ideas should come from your own interests and your hypotheses should emerge from your background research. THEN go looking for the subjects. Idealistic, perhaps, but too often I have seen students (and colleagues) work that way - (X has a class of Czech immigrants for sixteen weeks. Now, what kind of study could I do with them?) and produce some uninteresting and mediocre work as a result. Well, this is exactly the rule my co-investigator and I broke in the inception of this study.

In the fall of 1985, I had in one of my graduate classes a grade two teacher from an inner city school, and her class HAPPENED to consist of 24 children, 16 of whom were ESL learners - half of them beginners and half functionally bilingual. That in itself is not terribly unusual; we have such teachers in our classes every year. Two things were unusual about Mary Kennedy and her class. One was the degree of her commitment to whole language and the writing process, and the second was her refusal to have the ESL children segregated from their English-speaking peers. The number of ESL children in her class justified, even required, in the eyes of the school's administration, a

half-time ESL teacher (even though half the sixteen ESL learners were proficient enough to get by without additional language support, the provincial funding structure is such that each child whose native language is not English is eligible for a supplemental grant for three years and no school board is going to turn it down). Mary was not convinced, however, that dividing the day between her class and an ESL class was in the children's best interest, although if she had been selfish about it, it would have given her half a day with only eight children. Part of her skepticism was well-founded. The ESL teacher who had been hired had neither ESL experience nor training. Mary had a great deal of both. She was not, on the other hand, about to let her children lose the opportunity for a lower pupil/teacher ratio, and the compromise she suggested to the principal was to have the ESL teacher in the same classroom, working with her, everyday. The ESL teacher supported the idea, partly because she was worried about her own lack of experience with ESL and valued the opportunity to learn from Mary.

By the time I met Mary, her class had been in session for a little over two weeks. She explained her beliefs about whole language and her absolute faith in Donald Graves' statement that learning to write should be as easy as learning to speak, and she was convinced further that this was just as true for ESL learners as it was for native speakers. She planned her year accordingly. Without going into excessive detail, it soon became obvious that there was an important opportunity for research here, and Mary, David and I sat down and began to talk about what could be learned and how to go about it. Many of the avenues we wished to explore required fairly extensive video-taping. Unfortunately, the ethics committee in our Faculty would not grant permission for

video-taping, and so our research options were greatly restricted. They did not, however, have any jurisdiction over Mary who was free to do whatever taping she wished. And, of course, they placed no restriction on field notes, so in the end we were able to gather quite a lot of data about the talk and social interactions of the classroom. Still, our research hypotheses were constrained by the ethics committee.

B. Research Purpose and Hypotheses

Broadly, the purpose of the study was to analyze and describe the writing development of the 24 children in the multiethnic class to learn whether there are measurable differences between the three groups - the ESL beginners, bilinguals, and the native speakers. We hypothesized, first, that their previous experience with two languages would heighten the metalinguistic awareness of the bilingual group and would result in the greatest rate of development among the three groups in written English and, second, quite obviously that the beginning ESL group would show the slowest rate of development because they lacked even basic proficiency in English at the beginning of the study.

C. Analysis

We searcher for some time for a way to uncover these differences and finally settled on the analytic model developed for the Crediton writing project (Wilkinson et al., 1980). (One reason we chose the Crediton measures was that the project in which they were used included a great deal of writing by seven year olds, a difficult age group to find a large body of research data for.) While there was every reason to believe that these analyses would reveal interesting contrasts among the three subject groups -- contrasts relating to both cultural and linguistic experience, we suspected from the outset that the most

interesting results would come from the stylistic analysis - the most complex and time-consuming of the measures.

We were also aware from the outset that we were using the Crediton measures for purposes other than those for which they were developed. (For one thing, the measures were designed for use with assigned writing tasks, and we exerted no control over the kinds of writing the children did during the year.) An important purpose of the study, then, was to discover how appropriate the measures are for longitudinal, developmental description of children's writing.

This model yields developmental description in four categories -- cognitive, stylistic, affective, and moral development. In the end, we combined affective and moral development, leaving three categories for analysis.

1. The Cognitive Analysis

The predominant ideas here is that children's writing shows development from concrete to more abstract expression with age just as children's thinking shows development from concrete to abstract with age, so does their writing. (This claim is supported also by David's own research on writing in grades six and twelve.) This continuum from concrete to abstract is strongly related to children's progressive ability to "decentre," a developmental process which in children's writing, according to Moffett (1968), takes the form of increasing sensitivity to audience requirements and replacement of stereotypical with original ideas (p. 57).

The analytic sub-categories for measuring the data include describing -- language used to label, name, record and report, interpreting -- language used to explain, infer, and deduce, and

generalizing -- language used to form abstractions, to summarize, and classify, and speculating -- language used in conditional reasoning, exploring, projecting, and theorizing (Wilkinson et al., pp. 51-52; pp. 227-228).

This analysis has been done and I will be discussing preliminary results shortly.

2. The Affective Analysis

Although affect is notoriously difficult to measure or analyze, is is widely understood to be closely related to personal development and to the aforementioned continuum of progressive decentring. The analytic sub-categories in the Crediton project here are based upon the pioneering work on affect in children's writing undertaken by Harrison (1979) who, on the basis of his findings, argued for five developmental stages -- in chronological order, the expressive, reflective, identifying, organizing, and integrating stages (quoted in Wilkinson et al., pp. 59-60). The analytic subcategories in the Crediton research were self -- language used to express writers' own awareness of themselves and their general attitudes and dispositions, other people -- language expressing awareness of others' motivations and actions, reader -- language demonstrating awareness of context, and reality -- language distinguishing between worlds of fantasy and everyday fact.

3. The Moral Analysis

This category is predicated upon the well-known analysis of moral stages by Kolberg (1964) and the realization that children's writing reveals how they "come to terms with notions of evil, right and wrong" (Wilkinson et al., p. 70). Once we started to examine the corpus of writing, however, we found that because of the ages of the children and

the nature of the topics they wrote about, it was extremely difficult to uncover much evidence of development in this category. For efficiency, then (i.e., to prevent the rater having to go through the entire 700 pieces of writing another time), we combined the moral analysis with the affective analysis. These analyses have been done, but the results are not yet ready for presentation.

4. The Stylistic Analysis

According to the findings of the Crediton project, the writing of seven year olds is characterized by simple sentences, chronological organization, elementary use of cohesive devices, and proximity to spoken forms. Progress by age ten typically involves further sophistication identified by the presence of more complex sentences, wider forms of organization and cohesion, and growing awareness of the written, as opposed to spoken mode (ibid. pp. 171-174). The analytic categories of style include syntax -- movement from simple to complex sentences (with embeddings), verbal competence -- a category concerning writers' increasing capacities to express themselves through extended vocabulary, lexical discrimination, and ability to use abstract terms, organization -- concerning the matter of how writers gradually bring order to their texts and relate parts to the whole, cohesion -- covering the gradual introduction of cohesive devices ranging from pronominalization to use of logical connectives, antonyms, alliteration, and other literary forms, and appropriateness -- covering writers' growing abilities to modify register and to use written conventions, and, finally, to assume a variety of roles which are sensitive to the demands of audience and context, and effectiveness -- the matter of authors' unique handling of their own material. We will also be looking

for changes in the rhetorical effectiveness of writers in each of the categories of autobiography, narrative, explanation, and argument. This analysis is by far the most time-consuming and is underway now. We are, however, well into the cognitive analysis and this morning, I'd like to tell you what we've done and what we may have found.

II. Details of the Cognitive Analysis

We began the cognitive analysis by making copies of the children's writing so that the originals in their folders could be returned to the children. We then entered each piece into a database (Microsoft Works), coding it for writer, language group, and date. Our programmer then wrote a program which

1. accessed a piece of writing at random (so that the rater would not know the writer, language, or data the piece was written);

2. prompted her through decisions in each category.

Specifically, the program prompted her to identify exemplars of describing, interpreting, generalizing, and speculating language. She had to specify any language "chunk" which represented each category, and there was no limit on the size of the chunk. We worked backward, from "higher level" speculating to describing language, but the rater was required to identify all forms. She also had the opportunity to specify an "other" category into which she could fit chunks of language which seemed not to fit into any of the four categories. (This category was never used.) As a check on her decisions, she was then required to choose the predominate mode of each piece and assign a global "mark" (A,B,C,D) to the piece.

Our rater was a doctoral student with many years' elementary teaching experience. To check for rater reliability, we had fifty

randomly accessed pieces of writing processed by a second rater. We had 100% agreement on the predominant language type (describing, interpreting, generalizing, speculating), and correlation of .9 for the global mark and .89 for the number of language samples identified in each category.

III. Preliminary Results

A. Expectations

In beginning our analysis, and we have only begun, really, we determined what would constitute support for our hypotheses - what the numbers would show if our hypotheses were upheld. Fairly obviously, we expected to see:

1. In relation to the total number of language samples marked, less describing language used by the bilingual group than by either of the other two (with native speakers next and the most describing language used by the beginners);

2. The "highest" form of non-descriptive language to be used by the bilinguals; we didn't, for example expect to find much speculating language, but if we did, we expected to find it in the bilinguals' writing;

3. The bilingual writers to be the most fluent, that is, to write longer stories;

4. The highest global marks assigned to the native speakers for two reasons:

   a. struggling with the more abstract forms of language, the bilinguals might well show less control than they would over the safer describing language;

b. the possibility of more mechanical and spelling errors by the bilinguals which would influence the rater;

c. the POSSIBILITY of bias in the rater toward native speaker topics (the Vietnamese children sometimes identified themselves by the topics they chose to write about).

B. Results (Table One)

We have not yet submitted our figures to an analysis of variance, so what you are seeing is unanalyzed data. Many of the differences will not be statistically significant, but the directions are fairly clear.

1. First, as expected, the preferred form of language was descriptive. Also as expected, the bilinguals DID use less descriptive language than either of the other two groups.

2. The highest incidence of speculating language was found in the writing of the bilingual subjects. There was very little (only 1.2%) but it was there and in a slightly larger amount than in the native speakers' writing (1%). Moreover, the highest amount of generalizing language also appeared in the writing of the bilinguals (4.1% vs. 3.2% for the native speakers).

3. The most fluent as a group were the native speakers, producing an average of 467 identified chunks versus 373 for the bilinguals and 210 for the beginners. Since the length of a "chunk" could vary, however, we also looked at total words produced. Here we found the same pattern but smaller differences, indicating that the chunks identified for the bilinguals were somewhat longer than those identified for the native speakers.

4. The highest global marks were assigned on average to the native speakers. On a 4 pt. scale, native speakers averaged 2.2 while bilinguals averaged 2.0 and beginners 1.8.

C. Directions

One of our first tasks is to look at the magnitude of within-group variation. The figures suggest, for example, that the bilingual writers showed huge variability in their use of generalizing language, ranging from 1.36% to 7.8%. The native speakers and the beginners were far more consistent. Obviously, we will do an analysis of variance to investigate the significance and the strength of the differences. We will also do a t-unit analysis as another indicator of syntactic fluency and sophistication and compare those findings with those we have to date and, more significantly, we think, with our own stylistic analysis which includes an extensive syntactic analysis. By the time of SLRF in 1991, we would expect to have a more complete picture of the differences among the three groups of writers.

TABLE ONE

Language Group	Mean No. Language Samples Marked	Mean % Speculating	Mean % Generalizing	Mean % Interpreting	Mean % Describing	Mean % Global Mark
Native Speakers	467	1.0	3.2	6.1	89.6	2.2
Bilinguals	373	1.2	4.1	6.1	88.5	2.0
ESL Beginners	210	0.5	3.0	4.6	91.9	1.8

Reference

Wilkinson, A., Barnsley, G., Hanna, P. & Swan, M. Assessing language development (1980). New York: Oxford University Press.